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SUBJECT: LEBANON: TALKING, QUIETLY, OF MARONITE PATRIARCH
SUCCESSION

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (U) Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, the Lebanese Maronite Patriarch, turned 88 in May and there are quiet discussions about who will succeed him in this religiously and politically significant position. Following our report on the organization of the Maronite church (Ref A), this report delves into Sfeir's role in Lebanese politics and the current thinking on candidates to replace him. End summary.

SFEIR: THE PATRIARCH

12. (SBU) Some referred to Sfeir's selection as a "surprise" when he was chosen in 1986 to succeed Cardinal Anthony Peter Khoraish as Maronite Patriarch. But Sfeir's previous positions in the Maronite clergy suggest he was well-positioned to assume the role as head of the Maronite church. From 1961 until he was selected as the Patriarch, Sfeir was part of the Patriarch's inner circle at Bkirke, the seat of the Patriarchate. During the five year period prior to assuming that position, Sfeir served as the Secretary for the Patriarchate.

13. (SBU) Patriarch Sfeir has played an influential role in Lebanese politics, as is the tradition of his predecessors, and is consulted daily by a myriad of political figures from all confessions, but particularly Maronite Christians. He has long pushed publicly for an independent Lebanon, starting with his appeals to the French in the 1940s. During the civil war, he opposed the Syrian presence in Lebanon. A vocal supporter of all UN Security Council resolutions, Sfeir is often in agreement with U.S. policy in Lebanon. During the time when the parliament was closed and sessions were scheduled to elect a president (most of which were canceled), Sfeir routinely urged all parliamentarians to attend. He criticized "those who do not want a president and who are obstructing presidential elections" and also attacked Hizballah by saying, "There should be no two-state rule for Lebanon."

14. (SBU) Sfeir does not always relish his political role, since his public involvement in resolving political issues

has not always met with success. In 1989, he attempted unsuccessfully to reconcile two Maronite leaders, opposition-aligned Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and March 14/Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. To address tense relations between the Maronite Patriarchate and opposition Christians, Sfeir dispatched in early 2008 Beirut Bishop Boulos Mattar to broker a reconciliation with Aoun and Aoun's ally Marada party leader Suleiman Franjieh, an effort that was unsuccessful.

¶15. (SBU) In 2007, during the months-long impasse over naming a new consensus president, Patriarch Sfeir reluctantly succumbed to French prodding to present a list of candidates.

The initiative ultimately failed and led some to speculate on Sfeir's resignation. Sfeir ultimately played no role in the decision to elect consensus candidate Michel Sleiman as president. However, his refusal to give his stamp of approval for a "half plus one" candidate was a key factor in March 14's decision not to push for one of its own candidates, which it was confident could secure a simply majority.

¶16. (C) Another test of his political influence will be the decision, expected soon, on a Maronite to replace Sleiman as the next Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander. Patriarch Sfeir is known to support LAF G-2 Intelligence Director Georges Khoury, a leading candidate. Defense Minister Elias Murr, who opposes Khoury for the job, has told us that President Sleiman also opposes naming Khoury but the Patriarch's support is a roadblock. MP Saad Hariri too is opposed to Khoury's candidacy, and also has cited the Patriarch's support for Khoury as a significant factor to overcome (Ref B).

DECISION-MAKING IN SELECTING

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THE NEXT PATRIARCH

¶17. (C) Patriarchs are appointed to life-long terms and resignations are rare and publicly scorned. The previous patriarch resigned due to health concerns and passed away eight years later. Carol Dagher, who is an expert on Maronite affairs and a representative in the General Assembly Synod, told us that Cardinal Khoraish was somewhat tainted by a scandal over the murder of his nephew, though this is rarely mentioned. It is generally considered taboo in Lebanon to discuss who might succeed the Patriarch and the topic is broached only with great care.

¶18. (SBU) There is no definitive process for selecting the next patriarch. One method is for the 40 members making up the Archbishop Synod (Ref A) to elect the patriarch with a two-thirds majority. The Vatican plays a major role in approving the candidate selected by the Synod. If this majority is not reached, the decision is made by the Vatican.

Alternatively, the Council of Bishops can submit three names to the Vatican, which then chooses the final name. A third option is a direct appointment by the Vatican, which occurred when the Pope appointed Cardinal Khoraish's predecessor, Paul Peter Meoushi, in 1955.

¶19. (C) According to Dagher, "It is anyone's guess who becomes the next Patriarch." She noted that Patriarch Sfeir is reserved, and unlikely to state a preference for his successor. Nevertheless, previous Patriarchs share common characteristics. Often, the patriarch has been part of the inner circle at Bkirke, serving as an auxiliary bishop or an Archbishop. Bishop Bishara Rai from Jbeil told EmbOffs that a candidate should know Arabic (not to be assumed among older, French-educated Lebanese), and have relevant experience. The Patriarch must be younger than age 75, and is typically between 65 and 70 when appointed.

COMPETITION WITHIN THE COUNCIL

¶10. (C) Dagher suggested that there are varying self-interests among the bishops as to what kind of patriarch is desired; some bishops want to elect a strong personality whereas others prefer a weaker candidate in order to preserve their own independence.

¶11. (C) While no one has positioned himself to date as a candidate, Dagher listed off bishops she perceived to be emerging as strong bishops, include the Beirut Bishop Boulos Mattar, who is widely-regarded as the front-runner, the Metn Bishop Youssef Bishara, the Zahle Bishop Mansour Hobeika, and Bishop Greg Mansour, who represents the Maronite community in New York (but is too young, Dagher caveated).

¶12. (C) According to Father Marwan Tabet, Secretary General of the Catholic school system, Patriarch Sfeir does not wish to see Youssef Bishara succeed him because he blames Bishara for Christian in-fighting during the 2005 parliamentary elections. Sfeir appointed Bishara as the spiritual head of Oornet Shehawan, a coalition of Christians united in their call for Syrian withdrawal prior to 2005. Sfeir attributes Oornet Shehawan's losses in the 2005 elections to Bishara's inability to keep the Christians united.

¶13. (C) Tabet predicted that Sfeir will remain as Patriarch for the next two years to ensure that Bishara, who will turn 75 and retire in two years' time, does not succeed him. Tabet said it is possible Sfeir may choose to retire once Bishara is no longer in the running, when Sfeir will be 90.

GRANT